ANTI-BRITISH MOVEMENT IN ORISSA, 1817

B.C.Ray, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar

In 1803 the British occupation of Orissa was followed by the establishment of British power and then was introduced a set of new administrative measures not known to the people of Orissa previously. They were British judicial courts, revenue settlements, salt monopoly and a number of rules and regulations pertaining to various aspects of the new administration. Because of their unfamiliarity and ignorance of the details of the local institutions and of the previous Maratha administrative methods, the British were disinclined to retain or even honour any aspects of the indegenous system.[1]

The defect of the new British system was its unsuitableness to the type of environment in which it was applied, and which had a different pattern of its own. The British economic policy, when introduced, led to some popular dissatisfaction, specially in connection with the establishment of the zamindari system and overassessment of lands,[2] with the currency system because of the disturbed ratio of kauris and silver, with the salt monopoly because of the rise in the price of salt,[3] and with the management of the embankments because of its

---

1. 13 May 1818, Ever to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818, No.15.

2. 26 November 1818, Trower to Stirling, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 13 May 1819, No.22.

3. 2 May 1817, Impey to Government, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 23 May 1818, No.1.

corruption. In the judicial affairs the access to civil justice was tedious and difficult to all classes of the people because the people knew nothing of such rules and regulations.[4] A type of new bureaucratic machinery was developing which was "corrupt and extortionate to a degree."[5] The administration of the criminal justice was also attended with vexation and difficulties to prosecutors and witnesses and hardship to the innocent prisoners, as previously, unlike under the British procedure, a complainant, without going through a process of regular formalities, had access even to the highest judicial authority and could readily get addressed his grievances without much unnecessary expenditure.

Thus the British system which suffered from inadequacies and deficiencies and which failed to adapt to the new atmosphere with a different historical background and habits of the people, prepared the way for what may be called an anti-British movement, for all to be mobilised by the conservative forces. This movement received strength from various sections of the people who lost their prominence during the new British rule or faced economic hardship in some way or the other. Firstly, the Raja of Khurda, who was dispossessed of his Khurda territory and was imprisoned for

---

4. 13 May 1818, Ewer to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818, No.15; 19 July 1820, Court of Directors to the Governor General in Council, Judicial Letters to Bengal, 1820, Vol.V, pp.522-4.

5. 28 September 1816, Watson to Nizamat Adalat, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 7 February 1817, No.37.

sometime, was later on merely appointed as the superintendent of the temple of Jagannath although other Rajas who rebelled against the British at that time were restored to their original territories.[6] Therefore, the Raja of Khurda remained dissatisfied with the British. Although he himself did not come forward to lead the anti-British movement, yet there is evidence to show that his back-door policy gave enough moral support to those who were the protagonists of such an agitation. Secondly, the worst-affected people in Orissa were the local militia class, who previously being enrolled in the army of the Raja of Khurda or elsewhere could maintain some social status and earn a decent livelihood. But the British did not require their services. With the dissolution of the unrequired militia, a good number of people lost their profession and also thereby their means of livelihood.[7] Thirdly, the religious communities, more particularly the orthodox Hindus, did not look towards the new Christian Government with favour. Again the disassociation of the British administration with the management of the temple of Jagannath and the criticism of the worship of Lord Jagannath by some

---

6. 24 December 1804, Harcourt to Shawe, Add. MSS. 13610, p.193; 16 May 1805, Government to Harcourt, Bengal Secret and Political Consultations, 16 May 1805, No.405.

7. 13 May 1818, Ewer to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818, No.15.

Christian missionaries in Orissa,[8] at least gave the impression to many that the British were different from the Marathas who actively patronized the Jagannath Temple and encouraged some Gosains and Brahmins by their donation and favour. Therefore, inspite of the utmost measures taken by the British not to wound the religious suceptibilities of the Brahmins, the conservative Brahmins had no sympathy with the new rule[9] and many Pandas were prepared to stretch their hands to any anti British movement. Fourthly, the new bureaucracy the British instituted, in a society ignorant of their regulations, simply granted almost unlimited power to the Amlas who, for their selfish interest, could unscrupulously manage to deprive many original proprietors of their estates. The loss sustained by the proprietors was irrepairable, and they were reduced to abject poverty and grew desperate to join with anyone that would see to the rapid elimination of British power.[10] Fifthly, the British introduced annual settlements for some period and overassessed the land and imposed the land revenue at a higher rate, which the cultivator was not in a position to pay. This

---

8. Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society, Vol. IV, p.448.

9. In an unpublished Oriya Manuscript "Firingi Kali Bharat", written by Madhusudan Bipra (1834-35), the British in Orissa have been called as Asuras or Mlechhas. The use of such contemptuous words is indicative of the dissatisfaction with the Christian rule. This manuscript is important from the historical point of view.

10. Out of 2,340 Original proprietors whose names were registered in the first settlement for the revenue of Cuttack(Orissa), only 1,448 remained at the end of 1816. 23 May 1817, Trower to Board of Revenue, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 24 October 1817, No.38; 13 May 1818, Ever to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818, No.15.

overassessment brought dissatisfaction to almost all on whom the burden of the land tax fell.[11]

The disaffection and discontent of the various sections of the people, as mentioned above, contributed to the rise of an anti-British movement. But these did not give rise to a rebellion or receive a political shape, till the leadership was given by a person of consequence, popularly known in Orissa as Boxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Bhramarbar Ray. The immediate cause of the rebellion was that he was unjustly and in an unscrupulous way deprived of his estate through the mischief and villainy of some Amlas,[12] Jagabandhu repeatedly protested against this and even presented a petition to the British authority for the restoration of his estate but in vain.[13] Against this injustice he reacted very violently. He came forward to champion the cause of the persons who suffered under the British and were ready to follow him in his anti-British agitation. The cause for which he stood has been told in his own words as follows:

"The inhabitants .... have sustained in the Mofussul a

---

11. 19 July 1820, Court of Directors to Governor General in Council, Judicial Letters to Bengal 1820, Vol.V, pp.342 & 350; 23 May 1817, Trower to Board of Revenue, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 24 October 1817, No.38.

12. Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Mahapatra Bhramarbar Ray, popularly known as Jagabandhu, inherited the office of the Bakhshi, the Military Commander of the Raja of Khurda. He was next to the Raja, both in rank and authority, because of his influence over the military of the country. He was regarded by the Gajapati Rajas and the people of Mughalbandi as second to the representative of the ancient royal family of Orissa. He had matrimonial alliances with the Raja of Shergarh on Ghumsar frontier and the Raja of Baramba in Orissa. 13 May 1818, Ewer to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818 No.15.

13. 14 January 1814, Richardson to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 29 January 1814, No.35; 13 May 1818 Ewer to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818, No.15.

variety of injuries and oppressions, ...as an instance of which a seer of salt which used to be sold for 1 Pun of cowries cannot at present be procured for 12 Puns, moreover where one rupee was once taken on account of revenue ten are now exacted and after all there are after [sic ? often] demands and balances. By the injustice of the judges, the oppression of the wicked thanadars and the tyranny of the officers of salt mahals, the people are altogether overwhelmed and being unable to leave their beloved native lands are grown desperate and careless of life. They have accordingly with the intention to avenge their injuries appointed me Jugbandhoo Bhomebur their leader"..[14]

Now, Jagabandhu at the head of the insurgents prepared his objectives which suggested the elimination of foreign rule, restoration of the Raja of Puri's Bower (formerly Raja of Khurda to the territory of Orissa, reinstatement of the original proprietors on their former estates and redress of all the grievances confronted by the people under the British rule.

The rebellion started in Khurda in the last week of March 1817 and soon the whole of this region was in the grip of the rebels. Then it spread to Puri and there was response to it from a large part of the coastal region including the territories of the Raja of Kujang and Kanika. In this rebellion, Pandas, Malangis, dispossessed zamindars and many other people joined hands with the rebels. As a result, the British power

---

14. Encl. 15 July 1817, C.A. Molony, Persian Secretary to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 24 Oct. 1817, No.49(A letter of 26 April 1817 from the Raja of Khurda to Government).

was eliminated for sometime from Khurda and Puri and from certain regions adjacent to Cuttack[15] and the British position even at Cuttack was found to be critical.

One of the peculiar characteristics of the rebellion was that the main point of attack of the insurgents was the government offices. Rebels plundered or burnt the treasuries or the Kacheris of the Tahsildars and other officers at Banpur, Khurda and other places. It is stated "that no Houses were destroyed, no property plundered and no one individual touched excepting those connected with government."[16]

This anti-British movement could not succeed principally because of the superior military power of the British. They brought the Bengal artillery to assist the British soldiers at Cuttack who had now been employed for fighting against the rebels.[17]

Secondly, the lack of unity further weakened the position of the insurgents. Though most of the people in Puri and Khurda enthusiastically joined the movement, yet there was no satisfactory response from the Balasore region or many parts of

---

15. 29 March 1817, Impey to Government, Bengal Criminal Jidicial Consultations, L.P., 11 April 1817, No.1; 10 April 1817, Impey to Government, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P.,12 August 1817 No.11; 15 April 1817, Impey to Government, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 12 August 1817, No.15; 14 June 1817, Impey to Government, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., August 1817, No.31-A.

16. 30 March 1817, Impey to Government, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 11 April 1817, No.3.

17. 8 April 1817, Government to Impey, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 11 April 1817, No.12; 29 February, Stirling to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 19 May 1820, No.25.

Cuttack region. Many Garjat Rajas kept themselves aloof or were sometimes sympathetic towards the British. Thirdly, the military resources of the rebels were limited and the soldiers hastily recruited from here and there were mostly untrained ones.

With the arrival of the reinforcement from Bengal, the British succeeded in repelling the attack of the rebels who were defeated and put to flight. Their leader, Bidyadhar, was made a prisoner at Cuttack for the rest of his life.[18]

Thus, the rebellion of 1817 was a failure, but the cause for which Jagabandhu fought and was imprisoned for life at last triumphed. Most of the grievances, about which Jagabandhu complained, received due consideration at the hands of the British administration. The enquiry which was made into the causes of the rebellion revealed many flaws in the British system and reforms were accordingly introduced for removing the grievances of the people and to improve the morale of the administration, more condusive to the interest of the people rather than to the exclusive interest of the British only. In other words, estates were restored to the original holders,

---

18. 4 September 1823, Government to Commissioner of Cuttack, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultation, L.P., 4 September 1823 No.22; 4 June 1825, Commissioner of Cuttack to Government, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 16 June 1825, No.9; Resolution, 28 April 1826, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, L.P., 28 April 1829, No.27.

the landed aristocracy was reinstated, the jama of the country was reduced, the reduction of the jama helped in restoring the disturbed ratio of Kauries and silver, more salt was supplied, the price of salt was lowered, and adequate measures were taken to remove corruption in the management of embankments.[19]

19. 13 May 1818, Ewer to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 17 July 1818, No.15; 29 February 1820, Stirling to Government, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 19 May 1820, No.25.